



4-15-2000

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.09.15>

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### Recommended Citation

Susman, Tara (2000) "The Vogue of Life: Fashion Culture, Identity, and the Dance of Survival in the Gay Balls," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Vol. 9 , Article 15.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.09.15>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol9/iss1/15>

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Tara Susman

## The Vogue of Life: Fashion Culture, Identity, and the Dance of Survival in the Gay Balls

During the summer and fall of 1997, I did fieldwork in the gay *Balls*<sup>1</sup> of the greater New York area, spending time with members of the *House* of Vizcaya, a Newark, New Jersey-based family, and participating in preparations for its annual Ball. These preparations included extended conversations planning the event, various errands and set-up, sewing and costume-making, and a generous amount of just hanging out. In addition, I attended approximately twenty Balls and "Mini-Balls," in Newark, New York City, and Philadelphia, usually with members of Vizcaya. I was present at about half a dozen House meetings in which upcoming Balls and other events were discussed, and House members touched base with each other and aired conflicts and problems. I also helped Angel, the mother of the house, plan his annual fashion show. After the Vizcaya Ball, Angel began to call me a daughter of the House.<sup>2</sup>

In this essay, I focus on the paradoxical and transformative syncretic practices related to the Balls' African-based roots and fashion, gender, and sexuality within the Ball subculture. I am interested in how these syncretic practices create a cultural memory distinct from that of a largely hostile mainstream, and how an emphasis on imitation and creative invention becomes the

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journal of social theory*  
(9). Committee on Social  
Theory, University of  
Kentucky, Lexington, KY



means of cultural and physical survival. My perspective differs from that of the journalists and academic researchers cited in my paper. Unlike most of the journalists, I have spent more time with my "subjects" and my examination draws from a range of theoretical scholarship. Additionally, none of the research cited has been conducted in my community of study. Most important, most of the scholars who discuss gay Balls refer only to the film *Paris is Burning*, using the film to discuss and illustrate theories that extend beyond the ballroom. Although I find the work of these scholars useful, my allegiance is first and foremost to the House of Vizcaya and its culture. Thus, my goal is to pull together some of what I have observed and learned from House members and theorize from that, rather than to fit Ballroom culture into a pre-existing theoretical framework.

Although House members spend a great deal of time in dance clubs, the quintessential social event that holds the community together is the Ball. Balls are a combination fashion show, Olympics, and party, and are highly charged with competitive energy and creative artistry.<sup>3</sup> These events, at which the Ball subculture creates (and breaks) its own rules, occur in YMCA basketball courts, one-room dance clubs, hotel ballrooms, and other large open spaces. A ballroom layout is like that of a fashion show, with a long T-shaped runway that stretches out into the center of the room. (The runway is usually simply a marked-off area of the floor, although occasionally it is on a raised catwalk.) Tables and chairs crowd around the sides of the catwalk and a long table of judges parallels the back wall. People usually *walk* (compete) as a representative of a House, entering the runway area from the crowd and moving towards the judges' panel.

The basic organizing unit of the Balls is the House. A House is a group whose members are urban gay youths of color who, often shunned by their ethnic communities and their "real" families, find themselves on the street. The Houses are a creative response to poverty, joblessness, and discrimination, providing support and a distinct culture for their members. A House typically consists of a *mother*, *father*, and *kids* (Ball participants are usually referred to as kids or *children*). In theory, a member of any gender may take the role of either parent. Members of a House do not live together and the mother and father rarely have a romantic or sexual relationship with each other. Instead, they operate as partners to provide emotional and practical support for the kids, act as role models, and help the kids prepare for Balls.

Ideally, a House lasts many years, during which the mother and father and their children win many trophies at Balls and become "legendary." Like a team, members of the House sit together at Balls, and

when their kids win trophies, the entire House gains recognition. Houses can spring up or fold at any time according to the desires of those children who decide (or are asked by their parents) to become parents themselves. Kids may switch Houses and some do so frequently. There are not necessarily specific requirements for joining a House other than the approval of the mother and father. A House may recruit a child who members like or believe has the potential to win trophies. The name of a House, which is selected by its mother and father, reflects some of the practices valued by the community, particularly fashion and achievement. House names include Aphrodite, Armani, Chanel, Divine, Ebony, Escada, Excellence, Genesis, Infiniti, Jourdan, Karan, Latex, Milan, Mizrahi, Polo, Prestige, Tuscany, Ultra-Omni, and Xtravaganza. Within the ballroom subculture, children take their House name as their surname.

When a House is planning to host a Ball, it distributes fliers, usually at other Balls, to announce in advance the specific categories which will be open for competition. Categories are first broken down among four genders: (1) *women*, people born with this biological designation regardless of sexual preference, (2) *butches*, lesbian women who always look like men, (3) *butch queens*, gay men who usually look like men, and (4) *femme queens*, people born male but who live life as "women," often assisted by cosmetic surgery and hormones and usually without a genital *sex change*. Categories for butch queens in drag are distinct from femme queen categories. Although straight men are not included in these categories, some may attend the Balls as friends of children. In my experience, during a Ball members of all of the gender categories can be found socializing, putting on costumes, and occasionally, using the toilet in the women's bathroom. Despite such social mixing, a child is strictly required to compete within her gender category. Here the feminine pronoun is appropriate because kids use it to describe all of the above genders.

These categories are treated as essential even as they intrinsically confirm the constructedness of gender. There are always a few kids who don't seem to fit precisely into any one category (e.g. "feminine" looking butch queens with long hair and soft bodies who do not "do drags"). Such category violations may be met with passionate and near-violent debate. On the other hand, an individual can make a gender change, and category definitions do shift slowly.

Within her particular gendered division, an individual can compete in categories for the most beautiful *face*, the sexiest *body*, the most skillful *voguing*, and various types of runway walking (e.g., evening wear, designer's delight, sportswear). The standards used to judge children in



any given category depend upon the description of that category in the flier. For example, children are judged for "realness" (are they considered capable of "passing" in the straight world?). Are they "cunty" (are butch queens' gestures exaggeratedly effeminate)? How "shady" can they be (are they upstaging opponents and treating them with disdain)? To win a runway (modeling) category requires more than a fabulous outfit. Smooth, graceful, "on point" runway walks with precise T-stops (where the heel of the front foot rests by the arch of the other foot) and sharp turns must be performed with an understated all-knowing facial expression.

A subtle improvised duet between the DJ and the commentator maintains the upbeat pace of the Balls and sets the tone for each category. One DJ, who is usually hired for all of the Balls in New York and New Jersey, plays dance music from the children's favorite clubs and songs written expressly for the Balls with lyrics in the appropriate slang. The commentator is a skillful emcee who announces each category and maintains a running opinionated commentary about each contestant to keep the energy of the crowd up. The DJ follows the commentator closely, stopping and starting the music at the commentator's cues.

Kids walking a category take the runway one by one, perform, and receive the judges' scores. If a judge *sees it*, she gives a score of 10; if she does not see it, she may *chop* the person in question. After all of the competitors have walked alone, they walk again in pairs or groups. Through a *process of elimination*, judges vote for the winner and award her a trophy. Although judges rely upon personal preference, they must also uphold shared ideas of aesthetics and enforce the precise requirements of categories. For example, if, in a butch queen category, kids are supposed to walk sporting a white Calvin Klein T-shirt, hidden labels will be checked and a contestant wearing a different brand, a colored shirt, or a different style shirt will be disqualified.

#### *Fashion and the Balls*

The role fashion plays in the Balls cannot be overemphasized. For example, typical categories from Ball fliers from 1997-98 include: "*Sudden Change: Haute Couture Evening Wear* — Once you open your cape, hiding your one-of-a-kind showstopping gown, the ballroom will never be the same... Accessories a must." "*Best Dressed Spectator* — Just came to spectate, but you're totally done." "*European Runway Model's Effect*... Big Boys with an Ovah<sup>3</sup> Umbrella. Tall Boys in a sickening Ovah flowing skirt. Midgets in a Black Top Hat. Labels are not a must." "Designer's Delight: It's 1827, and the 'Fashion Elite' wishes to see what the new generation has learned from the old." Although

women's clothing has a strong emphasis, almost half of the categories for fashion are devoted to menswear.

On the one hand, this subculture illustrates the "trickle-down" theory endorsed by many fashion writers: elite designers create styles that are desired, imitated, and worn by the masses (Craik, *The Face of Fashion*, is a notable exception). The children watch fashion shows on television, read about new designs in fashion magazines, and visit fancy boutiques that sell the hottest clothing. As evidenced by many of the House names, clothing designers have near mythic status. Expensive clothing made by recognized designers (*labels*) is highly prized and acquired in amounts that are surprisingly large in light of the low economic status of most of the children. Labels worn at the Balls are acquired through theft and credit card fraud, temporary purchase (the clothing is returned the next day), borrowing from others, and, occasionally, outright purchase. Even the kids who do not acquire expensive clothing are among the most fashionable youth of New York — they wear less expensive brands or knockoffs of elite brands. At first glance, the kids' behavior seems to be easily explained as a form of fetishism. However, it is clear that children not only learn how to be fashionable from each other and from the mass marketing of elite fashion, they also exercise remarkable fashion innovation.

Despite the nostalgic yearning for the do-it-yourself days of the past recorded in *Paris is Burning*, the children are still creative. Many design and sew the clothing themselves. Many Houses have a designer; those without employ local designers from other Houses or designers with ballroom connections to make individual and group outfits. Design creativity reaches Halloween extremes in the category of Bizarre where many costumes become sculptural, with elements such as moving parts, flashing lights, or wings. Non-designers may also make Bizarre creations. One Vizcaya child recently won several grand prizes for constructions created with a glue gun to shape cardboard, metallic paper, plastic baby dolls, and flashing lights.

According to Fred Davis (39), mainstream men's clothing became "more simple, coarse, unchangeable, and somber" with the rise of the bourgeoisie. Therefore, it seems logical that men with different values and social status, who have exploded the category "men," would define themselves against this trend. Hollander (11) argues that the "remarkable and fantastic modes of dressing ... [which] are continually adopted chiefly by the powerless, those not in the mainstream of action," are becoming more important in mainstream fashion for all men. And, as far removed as the ballrooms seem from the world of elite designers, there is no question of the importance of the "street influence" on elite de-



sign. Those who mimic high fashion are mimicked by high fashion as well. If urban African Americans have a system of fashion that is both distinct from and related to the mainstream system and that has been known to take a decidedly political turn (c.f. Cosgrove on zoot suits), then this is certainly the case with a group triply marginalized by race, sexuality, and class. Within a hostile larger social context, this subculture affirms both individual and group identities by performing their aesthetics, ethics, and politics (Browning).

Some of these identities are a direct challenge to hegemonic ideas about power and status. If the Balls are one fashion economy, then a number of different codes are simultaneously in play and are made commensurable. A femme queen done up like a porn star in sparkling pasties, a feather boa, and high heels, a woman in a flowing black velvet evening gown and long gloves, a butch in full camouflage army gear, and a butch queen dressed as Wonder Woman from Hell with six arms all may win a trophy the same night. Creativity, through mimicry and recombination, becomes a value.

The form of the Balls strongly resembles that of fashion shows, as evidenced by the use of the runway, the restriction of movement to the runway, the concern with display and evaluation of the most fashionable clothing, and the blaring music. The word *House*, which designates family in the Balls, echoes its use in the fashion world, as in the House of Chanel. Mother Angel Vizcaya, who makes her living as a designer, puts on a fashion show every year in Newark in the same room where Vizcaya throws its Ball. At Angel's fashion shows, an announcer employs a style reminiscent of the commentator at the Balls to describe and extol the clothing worn by models who strut up and down the runway, the admission cost of the fashion show is the same as that of the Balls, and Angel offers the same buffet dinner, prepared by his biological mother, at both events. There are other links between the two events: Angel uses some of the women from her House as models and some of the Vizcaya women first met Angel while working as models in her fashion shows. Damon, father Vizcaya, helps to train new models to perform a runway walk, just as she trains new House members to walk. She and other House members who are not walking in the fashion show assist backstage during the event, as I did. Some of the same people attend both events; however, there are more women at fashion shows.

One of the most interesting connections between the Balls and fashion is historical and involves the evolution of voguing, the dance that I find the most interesting creation to emerge from the confluence of both worlds. In the 1960s, fashion shows in the U.S. and Europe began to feature music in their productions and models began to dance and

run down the catwalks. During this era, photographic models began walking fashion shows, striking severe arrogant poses as if for a camera. The model had become the centerpiece of the fashion industry rather than an accessory to it. Additionally, during the 1960s, the men's fashion industry took a strong upward turn and designing for men became the rage (Craik 81-2, 192).

Several sources (Trebay, Suggs, Green) place the birth of voguing during this decade. Because it was introduced as a substitute for fights that might occur at a Ball, it was charged with a subdued element of violence from the beginning. As *Old Way* voguing was little more than "freeze frame fashion posturing" (Deckle 36), it seemed to draw its form directly from the various industry changes happening in fashion at the time.

Also in the 1960s, the dominant look at the Balls began to shift from cabaret/Las Vegas style to high fashion. In the late 1970s and 1980s, more butch queens began to participate in the Balls. Sometimes they appeared as men, sometimes in drag. Today, with butch queens in ascendancy, Balls are no longer a contest in which audience and performer are separated. A critical difference between fashion shows and the Ball is that anyone in the audience at a Ball can compete. At a Ball, everyone has the potential for renown and, although certain kids become favorites and some outcomes may be predicted, constant and dramatic upsets are equally certain.

In this context, what are the right questions to pose about fashion? Questions such as "How does fashion make meaning?" or "What does fashion mean?" imply that fashion's meaning can and must be pinpointed in words. Although it may be useful to consider fashion as a language, this metaphor may add more problems than it solves. Although Fred Davis considers fashion to have qualities of a discursive semiotic code, if not fully a language, he emphasizes that the ways in which clothing makes meaning is not clear. There is no set of rules that fashion follows. Davis (6-7) sees ambiguity as a crucial element of fashion's "speech" and offers three ways to consider how fashion makes meaning: 1) it is "context dependent," 2) there is considerable variability in how different groups read different symbols, and 3) it is given to "undercoding," i.e., non-explicit meaning which requires inference. These three elements seem to require an ethnographically specific subject. In the world of the Balls, the most important means through which fashion speaks its ambiguous language are runway walking and voguing.



## Voguing

*Voguing* is the signature dance of the Balls. Although the basic form resembles the poses and attitude of runway fashion models, it has been combined with other dance styles into many versions. This ongoing recombination is partially the result of voguing's multiple arenas of practice which include dance clubs in New York City and the Christopher Street pier, a hangout for black and Latino gays. All voguing improvises from a broad vocabulary of movement. Inventiveness is important because a *battle* often proceeds by one-upmanship when two or more competitors face off. The use of the term *battle* to refer to a voguing contest recalls its substitution for fights. Battles can be fierce and physically dangerous. In addition to attempting to cow an opponent, knowledge of what the children would call the politics of voguing (understanding the psychology of the crowd and the judges) is just as important. Competitors must calculate how, when, and where particular movements should be performed. Such decisions are made with lightning speed, not always consciously. The following definition of club dance is helpful in theorizing voguing: it blends "ethnic, gender, regional, and even neighborhood styles. Humor and commentary are embedded in the process — as this is the optimistic premise — that dance is always in evolution, and that reinvention and adaptability are strategies for what life, at its best, should be" (Somer 7).

Voguing the *Old Way* is slowly striking pose after pose after pose. Pooley (56) describes the *New Way* of voguing as:

a dance emphasizing the transitions between poses: lightning fast hand motions and whirling arms, swoops and spins on the ground, and improbable contortions, all delivered with an elegant, deadpan attitude ... Bodies moving in ways that recall Bruce Lee movies, Egyptian hieroglyphics, Nike commercials, positions from the Kama Sutra.

The *New Way* may involve *stretch* such as the dramatic displacement of double jointed shoulders, leg splits on the floor or standing, or more athletic and gymnastic movement such as head or shoulder stands, spins, and flips reminiscent of breakdancing.

Voguing techniques, like the fast-paced fashion culture, go in and out of style. Femme queens vogue only straight *Old Way* or *New Way* (without stretch or gymnastics), women vogue somewhere in between *Old Way* and *New Way* (again, fairly plain), butches rarely vogue at all (when there are butch vogue categories, no one walks them), while butch queens have a range of styles. Voguing with a prop, popular

around 1995, is now rarely seen (it was formerly the specialty of Father Vizcaya, who had performed on a drill team, and so is an expert baton twirler). *Arms control*, which is performed only from the waist up, emphasizing the arms, was gaining in popularity during my research. In this version, two voguers face one another sitting in chairs, a configuration that makes them look like they are arguing silently and passionately.

Most popular in 1997 was butch queen vogue femme, also called *cunty* voguing. This is often performed with hyper-exaggerated effeminacy, with flopping wrists, small mincing steps, and *dips*, a dramatic step wherein a dancer who has one leg lifted high falls backwards to the floor and lands in an arched-back pose. This style is performed with much care, precision, and humor.

The connection between fashion and voguing is even stronger if fashion is used as a verb. The action is crucial: walking categories, making clothes, putting together an outfit with precise detailing. Many children are runaways through some combination of choice and necessity; thus, the ability to create a world, to reinvent family, and to reconfigure their bodies, in short, to "sit down at the sewing machine and take a simple a garment and turn it into a grand prize-winning ensemble" are all crucial to survival (qtd. in Trebay: 24). Anne Hollander (1978) emphasizes the importance of wear and motion in animating clothing. If runway models are meant to bring clothing to life, to act out the potential for power and identity lying ready in the cloth, this performance becomes even more vital in the context of the Balls and especially in voguing.

It is impossible to theorize how fashion makes meaning in this context without considering action, motion, and dance. Cindy Patton (85) suggests that "historicity cannot be separated from kinesthetics; that is, the struggle to make claims to political identity cannot be understood apart from the more corporeal sense of place that actors create in their resistance." Patton's suggestion of the importance that the felt experience of dance has for history is provocative. What would happen if we were to take seriously notions of dance as knowledge practice (Bequer and Gatti), as cultural memory which disturbs hegemonic narratives of history (Clark), as cultural critique, as theory?

Scott Poulson-Bryant (110) argues that voguing exposes the fallacy of a trickle-down theory of cultural learning: voguing is "a nice, polite, *fuck you* to the people in charge..." The dance requires:

attitude, star power, glamour — things the wider society thinks it has handed them but which gay men have actually shown it how



to wield<sup>4</sup> — and fills those essentially empty qualities with new, individual life (Poulson-Bryant 110).

Patton (85) argues that through movement, voguing performs a particularly powerful critique that “utterly transforms notions of white femininity already known to be critiqued by the mainstream.” More precisely, Becquer and Gatti contend that voguing is both ally and critic of hegemonic ideals such as white femininity. How does this double movement of alliance and critique work? Becquer and Gatti (446) maintain that voguing “articulates, in a particular form, discursive practices usually associated with diverse social, historical and ethnic contexts.” Articulation means “a practice which both speaks and links a set of elements whose historically shifting identities are modified in the process of being articulated” (Becquer and Gatti 446).

In addition to this powerful suggestion, another possibility would be, following Veve Clark (as summarized by Patton 89), to consider that “the systematic (even if nonformal) teaching of dance forms, and the watching of dance create a structure in which participants and spectators produce cultural memory.” The production of cultural memory seems particularly important for a culture in which notions of family, and ideas of group and personal history are constantly being constructed and refined. Some children’s claim that “you don’t *learn* to vogue” (Patton 94), does not prove that voguing is accessible only to those who have received it as cultural memory as much as it reinforces the importance of the idea of an essential cultural memory to the ballroom community. Cultural memory is crucial because the mainstream culture has forgotten the kids and their culture, if it ever knew them at all. Forging and maintaining cultural memory is complicated because large segments of this population appear to be constantly shifting and changing. How can one theorize the grounds of cultural survival in these circumstances?

#### *Syncretism: Paradox and Transformation*

One cannot fully examine the ways in which fashion is used to make meaning without looking at the ways in which the double movement of alliance and critique becomes a creative, transformative force that has enabled the cultural survival of the kids through their Balls. The most important transformative element is syncretism. In addition to its strong links to the fashion industry, the Balls stand at the intersection of a number of different social systems and cultural traditions. A Ball is a syncretistic form, “a site of intersection for the categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality” (Becquer and Gatti 445). It is also

an engaged struggle among various social, political, historical, and ethnic elements with permeable boundaries. Voguing is a syncretistic practice *par excellence* because the dance combines and articulates different elements while remaining a heterogeneous whole. Another way to think about the double movement is to consider that the antagonism of relations between voguers is “animated by the partial presence of the other within the self” (Becquer and Gatti 448).

Syncretism, according to this definition, is always political. In this context, “two discourses apparently separate (and often considered opposed) are syncretized in voguing: those of Africanist and of gay struggles” (Becquer and Gatti 448-9). This is an important point which differs slightly from what I will argue later, that African diasporic forms are present in the Balls. Although African forms are present, it would be wrong to claim that all of the participants in the Balls identify with an Africanist struggle. Probably close to 99 percent of frequent participants are black or Latino, but there are always a few members of other ethnic and racial groups as well. About one-third of the participants are Latino and, while the African presence in Latin America is well known (particularly in Puerto Rico where many of these children or their biological parents come from), many of these children self-identify as Latinos.<sup>5</sup>

Though many Houses are “multicultural” (the adjective Damon employed to describe Vizcaya), some Houses are perceived as black or Latino, which feeds racial tension. There have been some short-lived houses that were mainly white, including the House of Field, which was run by the owner of a West Village drag boutique who was interested in advertising her store (Suggs). These Houses were short-lived because the white children were not treated kindly by the judges. If the rejection of attempts by whites to enter the Balls and be recognized seems to be poetic justice, it is complicated by the fact that, as gays, many of the children of color have been rejected by their own ethnic communities. Further, bell hooks (149) has argued that kids in *Paris is Burning* idealize white womanhood which in turn reinscribes white patriarchy. While hooks offers this observation as a critique of the film’s perspective, it is possible that the same charge could be leveled at the Ball participants themselves.

So, is this a subculture of color, stratified by race and hated by the larger community of color, that idealizes whiteness while hating whites? Is this an instance of what hooks calls the “colonization of the mind,” the internalization of negative hegemonically produced stereotypes? Because syncretistic relations demand both alliance and critique, relations are never smooth or unproblematic. In many ways, it is a sub-



culture of paradoxes, and the most unlikely of paradoxes at times seem to be the most stable — these are the paradoxes that transform through syncretism.

### *Syncretism: African Diasporic Roots*

Because African Americans are the majority at the Balls and because Latino culture has been dramatically influenced by the cultures of Africans brought to Central and South America as slaves, I will look at African influences in Ball culture. One manifestation of African roots is multiple forms of mimesis. Zora Neale Hurston (59) describes

the Negro. . . [as] famous as a mimic. But this in no way damages his standing as an original. Mimicry is an art in itself. If it is not, then all art must fall by the same blow that strikes it down.

From this perspective, Ball participants' mimetic practices are exemplary of creative artistry because mimesis is a cultural form, perhaps the very ground of culture.

When theorized as essential to culture, mimesis unsettles questions of origin, making it difficult to determine when borrowing is not appropriation (Goldsby). Mimesis, according to Michael Taussig, has two aspects: imitation and a sensuous connection between the imitator's body and the "original" body. Barbara Browning notes that although much critical attention has been given to drag as a site of mimesis, racial and cultural identities are also mimicked. A kinesthetics of history becomes especially crucial when the art of mimicry means to "yield into and become the other" (Taussig xiii), a movement which complements Bequer and Gatti's notion of the self within the other during voguing. In the Balls, imitation is embedded within the different types of cultural systems as they intersect. Mimesis in this context is both the result of historical syncretism involving African diasporic culture and a force that continues to create new syncretic forms.

Even if one accepts the presence of African-based practices in the Balls, the strong parallels between African-based religions and Ballroom practices may seem surprising. In syncretic religions such as Santeria and Candomble, a religious community is known as a House. A House is run by a mother and father or godparents and its initiates are children or godchildren. Additionally, practitioners of African-based religions value the transformative power of dance. Writing of African-based religions and the Balls, Browning (164) asserts, "demarcated within a larger, hostile social context, such a community must act out aesthetic, ethical, and *political* precepts which will affirm their individual and *group* identities." Dance is the means by which kids act

out in the Ballroom.

Not only is there a parallel in the high value both African-based religions and the Ball subculture place on dance, voguing also appears to have roots in African dance forms. Both Patton and Poulson-Bryant make this argument in a general way. Patton, following Veve Clark, posits a similarity between voguing and a Martinican martial art which, like voguing, is a replacement for fighting. Similarly, Bequer and Gatti find strong resemblances between *capoeira*, developed by Africans during their enslavement in Brazil, and voguing. *Capoeira* was created as a martial art for self-defense but was disguised as a dance to hide its development from slave masters. *Capoeira* is both rhythmic and acrobatic, and is accompanied by music. Two people, who do not touch, play close to each other, with feet whizzing over each other's heads, similar to the kicking and dipping of children engaged in a voguing battle. If according to *Paris is Burning* Houses are in some sense "gay street gangs," then voguing is their most direct method of fighting. However, there is an important difference: *capoeiristas* remain focused on each other and no one wins; a voguer focuses upon looking fabulous for the audience and tries to win a trophy.

Despite this difference, the similarities suggest that voguing may be a late 20<sup>th</sup> century development of what Veve Clark calls a residue of traditional memory, which she links to both diasporic groups and dance. What might it mean if voguing "remembers" its African connections while its practitioners are unaware of these roots? I am not concerned with revealing unique or pure origins; instead I am interested in the ways of knowing in voguing and in Ball culture.

### *Syncretism: Fashion*

The larger system of fashion in American culture has multiple simultaneous streams (Hollander), and within the Balls these streams are combined and recombined with other elements. Mimesis is undeniable: many fashions, available through a "new media life" can be seen and copied by anyone with access to a television, regardless of income level (Hollander 198). The kids' worship of elite designers notwithstanding, the most chic designer outfit is not guaranteed a trophy. An outfit must be worn well, fitted with fashionable complementary accessories, and brought to life by a child with an "ovah" runway walk.

Further, the clothing made by the designers in the Balls only occasionally directly refers to the trends set by fashion authorities, and often puts a twist in the interpretation. For example, one designer showed a full-length coat made of clear plastic rectangles stitched together. Each rectangle featured the cover of a different *Bazaar* maga-



zine. *Bazaar* has a particular role within the Balls because it refers to a special category with a double meaning: *Bazaar*/fashionable and *Bizarre*/strange. Here, the African love of punning and layered meanings, that Hurston observed is in full play, and humor is an important element of cultural survival. The double meaning of *Bazaar*/*Bizarre* reveals the Balls' alliance with and critique of the fashion world. The category demands that clothing transform a person into a fantastical being, and the practice of fashion becomes the practice of magic. Yet it does so by suspending the restrictions on what is considered fashionable. This does not mean those who walk *Bazaar* do not adhere to particular aesthetic preferences. Such costumes often tend toward science fiction or comic book heroes, again with a twist such as car rearview mirrors jutting from shoulders or drag elements such as false breasts or a neon wig. In theory, anything goes — syncretism is a *Bazaar* value.

#### *Syncretism: Gender and Sexuality*

I now consider gender and sexuality as cultural systems. Like dance, both are open to change through mimesis and recombination, and cannot be understood outside of notions of syncretism. Gender is the quintessential site of paradox: although it appears to be fluid, open, and subject to change, gender performances may be policed under the guise of upholding category requirements. At several Balls I heard commentators warn straight men to stay out of butch queen "realness" categories, and an argument nearly erupted into a fistfight at one Ball when a femme queen, fresh from a sex change operation, dared to walk a woman's category.

Given that they are dominant in terms of numbers and in their roles of enforcers of Ball rules, it is not surprising that butch queens are allowed the most range of gender play. At the most basic level, a butch queen can participate in categories that allow her to pass as a straight man (*realness*) or as a woman (*realness up in drags*). Further, only butch queens can play with gender ambiguity. For example, she might walk "looking like a man but walking cunt," or "in a wig and an ovah skirt" without applying makeup or stuffing a bra. I have not seen such a range of possibility of combining gender styles and gender markers for any other gender. The butch queens also have the most categories overall and the most cash prizes. Could this apparent domination by butch queens reinscribe forms of domination in the larger culture? Or might the hyperelaboration of butch roles and relative freedom available to them problematize the category "man" by marking an formerly unmarked category?

Sexuality also plays a confusing role. The terms "gay" or "homo-

sexual" are inadequate to explain the varieties of sexualities at play. The kids would consider three of the four specified genders to be gay; only women are unmarked. In the House of Vizcaya, roughly half of the women identify as lesbian and the other half, straight, but all compete in "women's" categories. In theory, butch queens date butch queens and butches date butches and lesbian women. But, femme queens, who seem to ooze feminine sexuality from their pores, complicate matters because they might be with men who call themselves straight or with butch queens. Femme queens might also date femme queens, even though Angel says this is a stigmatized and thus highly clandestine practice.

Considering the variations in practice, the term "gay" is imprecise. What does it mean when butch queens (who refer to themselves as gay men) shout and whistle at a hyperfeminine femme queen with giant breasts in a skin-tight minidress? What does it mean when straight men and butches act the same way, or when butch queens stand up on their chairs to stomp in admiration for a lesbian woman in a lace bra, thong panties and high heels? I am not certain if it is possible, or desirable, to sort out and label all of the variations in Ballroom sexuality. Instead, I am interested in these practices as opportunities for creativity and recombination of sexualities. However, such sexualities are not fully articulated in the manner Bequer and Gatti describe; they are not fully spoken. This may be because certain combinations are less desirable than others or because any highly sexualized tactile displays of affection are very rare at the Balls. Frequent greeting kisses, hugs, and cuddles are the most explicit public gestures.

#### *Identity and Power*

I now turn to the relationship between voguing, identity, and power at the Balls by looking at gender production. The previous discussion of syncretism should indicate that I do not argue that gender is the ground or prior of other aspects of identity. I am trying to imagine a theory of gender that does justice to the Ball subculture and the other aspects of gender with which gender is inextricably linked. Judith Butler elaborated her theory of gender performativity in her criticism of *Paris is Burning*, placing imitation and repetition at the heart of gender production. Working from the importance of imitation and repetition, I turn to Ortner's (12) idea of the game.

The idea of the 'game' is meant to capture simultaneously the following dimensions: that social life is culturally organized and constructed, in terms of defining categories of actors, rules, and goals



of the games, and so forth; that social life is precisely social, consisting of webs of relationship and interaction between multiple, shiftingly interrelated subject positions, none of which can be extracted as autonomous 'agents' and at the same time there is 'agency,' that is, actors play with skill, intention, wit, knowledge, intelligence. The idea that the game is 'serious' is meant to add into the equation the idea that power and inequality pervade the games of life in multiple ways, and that, while there may be playfulness and pleasure in the process, the stakes of these games are often very high.

Would it be possible to consider the fashioning of identity in the Balls as a "serious game" in Ortner's sense? Within a game, a person may occupy multiple subject positions, and the form that identity takes may depend upon context as much as shifts in emphasis within the various intertwined aspects of identity, such as gender, race, and sexuality. The movement among positions seems to be one outcome of a culture composed of multiple syncretisms. Such possibility of self-transformation may be crucial to an oppressed group.

In the ballroom, fashion shapes and is used to shape different manifestations of identity. In fact, fashion may flourish in this context because of the instability, ambivalence, and contradictoriness inherent in individual and group identities (Davis). Of course the Balls offer children opportunities to transform their identities. More importantly, it may be through these opportunities for the self-fashioning of identities that a person may make sense of inherent ambivalences to find her way in life (Davis). Angel told me that he learned to be an individual and a part of something larger by designing and making clothes. His statement reflects the perspective of many kids, although those who are not designers may rely only upon the selection and combination of clothing to make themselves subjects.

According to Jackie Goldsby, Ball children are subject to and instruments of identity revision because they are both engaged with and disengaged from commodity culture. She argues that the kids' identity becomes another commodity fetish, the logical result of trying to live out consumer capitalism. Yet, rather than becoming alienated from some true self by such commodity/identity exchanges, children who remake their identities "find meaning and a kind of freedom in their actions" (Goldsby 111). She argues that making elite fashion commensurable with inner-city fashion levels the hierarchy of value that mainstream culture gives them. Fashion identity games thus revise the values of consumer capitalism as well as identity for those on the margin.

The prestige given to both fashion and female drag in the ballroom

seems a logical outcome of the strong focus on women's clothing in Western fashion. Despite the upward swing in the men's industry since the 1960s, women's clothing is the standard and men's is the marked term. Women's clothing tends to be highly elaborated; men's highly restricted. Together these codes form a single coherent sign system which, Davis argues (40), "seeks to ratify and legitimate at the deepest, most taken-for-granted levels of everyday life, the culturally endorsed gender division of labor in society." A strong commitment to the transformative potential in fashion, along with an acceptance of drag and other transgendered acts, threatens to unravel various naturalized constructions of gender and open up opportunities for identity shifts.

Drag is the clearest example of fashion shaping identity. Yet not all forms of drag are alike, nor are the ways in which they transform identity. Most of the writing on fashion and gender observes that the mainstream fashion of "menswear" for women is a trend that makes frequent returns in the late twentieth century. While this style may construct images of powerful women, it is never deeply disturbing. However, "men" in "women's" clothing is disturbing because this transgression disrupts normative notions of male/female power dynamics and a clearly segregated gender binary. Butches with beards who pass as men may be equally disturbing, and they are on the margin of the Ball scene.

In her discussion of *Paris is Burning*, Butler conflates butch queens in drag with femme queens. In fact, she focuses on femme queens, who typically would try to distance themselves from the idea of drag, since they aim to pass as women. Within the ballroom, such attempts are always a doubled passing. Because in the ballroom scene she will always be labeled a femme queen, she may be seen as having *realness*, but will not be considered a woman.

Identity change is clearly under scrutiny when it is subject to a test of realness. But even realness does not have a consistent definition. Trophy-quality realness for a butch queen (passing as straight) demands a tough homeboy aesthetic: street rather than high fashion clothes and a macho swagger. In contrast, fashionable realness for femme queens tends toward a porn starlet aesthetic. None of the trophy-winning "realness" femme queens could pass as a "straight" woman, although they do not look like men either. Hormonally, surgically, and sartorially enhanced, "realness" here means hyper-exaggerated femininity. To what extent is such a new identity merely exterior?

While she recognizes that the Balls (again, as depicted in *Paris is Burning*) question the binary of gender, Peggy Phelan reinscribes the male/female binary when she argues that men who cross dress cannot interiorize woman because they keep her image external. For Phelan



(102), gender fashioned on the exterior of the body does not transform an essentially gendered core identity; underneath the drags there is a man, even if "it is extremely difficult to say what a man is." Again, the distinction between a butch queen up in drags (even one who wins for realness) and a femme queen is important. A femme queen may not "internalize" woman, may not become a woman, but she cannot be said to be a man either. The relationship between the exterior and interior of the body cannot be so easily deciphered, especially in the case of children with surgical implants who take hormones; these "fashion techniques" affect more than the body's public exterior. Further, the connections between fashion and voguing also challenge the possibility that fashion affects only the exterior.

As with fashion, voguing challenges the stability and unity of identity, or perhaps enables such shifts to take place. Patton (96) argues that voguing "deconstructs" gender and race despite the identity of the person dancing. Bequer and Gatti (452) argue that voguing can make identity heterogeneous because it disrupts the possibility for a coherent experientiality. Voguing appears to have such a strong impact because of its syncretic African roots, because it draws upon fashion, plays with notions of masculinity and femininity, and because it is a kinesthetic language.

The ability to change oneself by shaping one's looks and one's movements may be one of the few options to assert power. Lee (215) reports that the "less power people feel they can exert over their environment, the more they attempt to do so over their own bodies." A subculture that asserts power in this way also shapes its environment, at least within the Balls. Fashion allows the children to develop their individuality while feeling connected to something larger than their individual selves. Articulated as a language of the subculture, fashion helps to define the group as distinct from the mainstream (Halliday). Arguably, voguing as institutionalized fighting plays a major role in holding the subculture together (Dekle); the Balls are a context in which children can resolve conflicts according to their own values. The Balls provide a perpetual challenge and ongoing puzzles and problems to work out, which are confronted through continuously evolving creativity. Thus through rivalries, voguing has evolved from the Old Way into myriad versions. This is not to say that problems are always worked out or that conflicts and violence do not exist within the subculture; it is simply saying that the children have created their own culturally specific methods to deal with these issues, other types of serious games.

### *How Do I Look?*

The mentally preserved visual element plays an important role in the kids' fashioning of individual and group identity. Hollander (311) argues that "dressing is always picture making, with reference to actual pictures that indicate how clothes are to be perceived." One picture in particular appears to have made a strong impression on the Ball subculture. Susan Fillin-Yeh argues that the figure of the femme fatale — reified femininity worn as a masquerade — stands at the nexus of ideas about modernization and urbanity, inhabits urban spaces like the dance hall, and is central to visual reproductive techniques such as photography and film. This figure haunts desires for both straight and cross-dressed femininity and wields "disruptive anti-knowledge behind a cool facade" (Fillin-Yeh 33). Her presence is demanded at Balls. It is secured by the performance of various registers of gender — even a butch realness queen resonates with some of the characteristics of the femme fatale.

This is a performing community and the majority of kids are interested in shaping their identities for a watching audience. Hollander notes that, beginning in the 1920s, the advance of cinema attached ideals of movement to ideals of clothing style which were absorbed by people who watched film and then imitated in anticipation of being observed. I agree with theorists who argue that photography and cinema are an effect, rather than cause, of a long complicated history of Western obsession with the visual. At the same time, I maintain that cinema and television do influence people's self-constructions and self-perceptions, especially where fashion is concerned. How else would we all recognize the figure of the femme fatale?

Describing the fashion public in general, Hollander asserts that people learn to move for a moving and/or still camera that may nor may not be watching and recording at any time. This quality is especially pronounced in the ballroom community. It is not sufficient to note that, despite the impact of *Paris is Burning* on the art film audience, children are largely unwatched by those with access to money and fame. Kids watch each other, record events with video and still cameras, show each other photographs, and watch old Ball tapes and comment upon them. Hollander (27) maintains, "without the camera there would be no fashion." Similarly, the idea of the camera is essential to the kids' identity formation and self-presentation.

Browning (166) argues that the "legends" of the Balls "explicitly mark their mythic genealogy through the media of print photography and film." If voguing records a cultural memory of African-based forms,



and the structure of the Houses reflects a similar history, may of the kids are not aware of these historical connections. Therefore, the constant use of visual recording devices provides the opportunity to create another kind of history, as evidenced by some categories from recent Balls: "Note: Acting Father Butter Cartier Slam Dunked this category last year. Please review Polo Ball tape '97." "Recreate one of these four hot moments: (do research). Season Karan dressed in red, selling it like a femme queen at Marc Chanel's \$50 Ball..."

Why the desire to create a recorded history? In part, no doubt, for the sheer pleasure of watching again and commenting. In part, to create a sense of connectedness between a large group of people across time. And in part, as a defiant gesture in the face of death which visits this community far too often, an attempt to make a mark of having-been-present. Visible legibility is sought as the ground for ontology.

### *Fashion and Death*

According to Walter Benjamin, fashion under capitalism produced commodity fetishism in perfect form: because it was driven by the continual planned obsolescence of clothing style, the desire for new commodities would be perpetual. Thus, Benjamin argues, fashion was allied with death. Susan Buck-Morss (101) traces Benjamin's argument further when she maintains that, "fashion is the medium that 'lures [sex] ever deeper into the inorganic world' — the 'realm of dead things'." Benjamin could not have known of the eerie way these ideas would resonate within the AIDS-stricken fashion community (both in the Balls and in the elite designer community). However, it is important to revisit his ideas because reports about the ballroom subculture in the press after the splash of *Paris is Burning* seemed intent upon pronouncing the death of the Balls and the kids. For example, a 1993 New York Times story chronicled the remarkable number of deaths of the stars of *Paris is Burning* and discussed the lawsuits brought by the remaining stars against the film's director. The author of the article (Green 11) claimed that the subculture was also dying:

Once mainstream America began to copy a subculture that was copying it, the subculture itself was no longer of interest to a wider audience, and whatever new opportunities existed for the principals dried up.

Green argues that the film gave birth to the community and that, without further opportunities for publicity in the mainstream media, the subculture was condemned to death. However, as much as children in *Paris is Burning* spoke of their dreams of fame, they commonly defined

fame as something they sought within the ballroom.

Perhaps because mainstream (re)viewers of the film often failed to notice that Balls are a "reality" with their own system of economics, power, and privilege, kids' aspirations to fame were interpreted solely as their desire for an outsider's gaze and the Balls were read again and again as a "fantasy." What could a subculture fantasy world do but die without outsiders' affirmation? Green argues (1) that mainstream mimesis of the subculture had killed the latter; "no one needs to go to a ball to see drag any more... (or) to see voguing either." Being so fashionable doomed the entire community to the death that is expected of every fashion.

One of the earliest mainstream stories on voguing is a 1990 article written by Eric Pooley in *New York* magazine. Pooley's story, headlined "The Vogue of Death," narrated events around a voguing battle on the Christopher Street pier, events which culminated in a stabbing. In a 1995 article, Guy Trebay (24) led his article about a benefit Ball for the legendary Avis Pendavis with the statement that, "folks have probably been prophesying the death of voguing since before it had the label." Despite his fatalistic lead, Trebay noted that the ballroom scene continued to renew itself again and again. Although the deaths of individual stars of *Paris is Burning* were read often as the death of the subculture, These tragedies were transformed into the birth of anti-AIDS activism in the Balls. Although Browning correctly noted that *Paris is Burning* was disturbingly free of references to AIDS, the film did contain an oblique reference to the community's AIDS activism in brief clips from a 1989 AIDS benefit Ball.

Nowadays there are at least two annual AIDS benefit Balls in the New York area, the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) House of Latex Ball in Manhattan and the FIRE Ball in Newark, sponsored by Project Fire and People of All Colors Together. The House of Latex was a brilliant project initiated and run by a few kids from the Ball community. GMHC pays Ballroom admission for kids who join the House of Latex. These kids go to Balls and compete like any other kids, but they are also targeted for AIDS education and trained to become AIDS peer educators. The annual Ball includes an AIDS-prevention fair and numerous categories that refer to safer sex. I heard an amazing description of a Latex Ball in which a House won a category walking together with members dressed as a safer sex kit, with costumes including a human-sized condom and latex glove.

The FIRE Ball is run by Newark-based AIDS organizations and a collective of Newark Houses. Beginning in 1996, in addition to categories such as "Safer Sex Commercial as a House," there have been con-



tests in which Houses have been invited to memorialize deceased members by constructing altars and quilts in their honor.<sup>6</sup> The combined efforts of such organizations have resulted in gestures towards AIDS education, usually in the form of a table piled with free condoms and prevention pamphlets, at nearly every Ball, even the smaller-scale Mini-Balls.

Has AIDS prevention gone out of fashion in the Balls? Although much lip service is given to safer sex, a change in practices does not necessarily follow. I have heard several cynical kids say that Latex is a "first" house, just a stepping stone into the Balls. In response to my questioning if these prevention strategies still work, Larry Abrams, the GMHC employee who ran the institutional part of the 1997 Latex Ball, cited a need for a more "interventionist" strategy because he believes that knowledge alone does not necessarily change practices. Even the repetition of prevention knowledge is no longer consistently of great interest at the Balls. In the 1997 FIRE Ball, no one walked any of the safer sex categories, even those with cash prizes.

#### *The Dance of Survival*

While it would be unrealistic to conclude on a romantic note that disavows the problems of AIDS, poverty, and other forms of violence that affect this community, I want to emphasize its incredible capacity for renewal and survival as individuals and as a group, for carrying forward and transforming cultural memory, and for creativity and generosity. In the fall of my fieldwork, Angel and Damon trained me to walk in the women's vogue category. They invented sequences of movement, commanded me to follow and copy them, then with a wave of their hands, urged me to improvise. In the middle of any House gathering, Angel would turn on music, face me, and make me dance, dancing in front of me and correcting me all the way. He always ended by assuring me, "Girl, you're going to *turn* it!" When the big day arrived, Angel brushed aside my complaint of nervousness as he rushed off to help another child prepare for her category and said, "Don't worry about a thing. Just remember, if you start to fall, turn it into a dip!"

#### *Notes*

- 1 I have italicized terms used in the Balls the first time they appear.
- 2 This paper was written immediately following my fieldwork, and my use of the present tense refers properly to 1997-1998.
- 3 In the interests of space, I will not examine ballroom language which is fascinating in many respects. "Ovah," which is a favorite descriptor, means fabulous. Note the pun "ovah flowing skirt."
- 4 This comment is especially on the mark if one recalls Willi Ninja in *Paris is Burning* teaching young, hopeful female models how to walk a runway.
- 5 I do not mean to imply that Bequer and Gatti are not aware of the Latino presence in the Balls; the opposite is clearly true. I am making a distinction between the ethnic connections that scholars and the children make.
- 6 The contests are an intervention by the Newark Project, an ethnographic and social service project run by Karen McCarthy Brown at Drew University. She calls such interventions "provoking data."

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